

House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (FOPO)
April 8, 2008

Mr. Robert Square (Chair, Cove Island Lightstation Heritage Association)

My name is Robert Square. I'm the chair of the Cove Island Lightstation Heritage Association. We take care of the 150-year-old, this year, Cove Island Imperial Tower.

I would like to thank the committee for allowing me to speak before you today. It's an honour to be able to do this and speak passionately about something I care so deeply about preserving.

The close association that our country has with the water is fundamental to our identity. Canada developed along the water, whether it's the east coast, the west coast, the Arctic, or the Great Lakes. Lighthouses have played an integral role in the development of our nation. Without these majestic towers and the people who kept the lights burning, Canada's role as a trading nation would not have been possible. I don't think Canada would have developed as it has without the lights guiding people.

The establishment of many coastal communities is fundamentally linked to their lighthouses, and the historic significance of these lights to these communities is irreplaceable. Our lights are important to Canadians. They stand against winds, tides, and storms and are, I believe, a symbol of Canada's strength.

I am not alone in my love for lighthouses. Canadians and people around the world are familiar with the beauty of one of Canada's most famous lighthouses, at Peggy's Cove. It is as Canadian as the maple leaf. It is unique.

Preserving these special places provides Canadians with outstanding opportunities to learn and personally experience our marine heritage. They are integral in what Canada is and what Canada could be.

The light I represent, the Cove Island Lightstation, is an example of these precious landmarks. It is probably one of the most completely intact light stations anywhere in North America. All the facilities are there. For 150 years this magnificent light has faithfully stood guard, warning the mariners navigating those narrow channels between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. It is a symbol of an era long past, with the walls of this circular limestone tower and stone cottage built in the middle of the Canadian wilderness. It holds very many fascinating stories. When Cove Island Imperial Tower was built, that area of Canada was essentially the end of the earth. There was nothing there. It was wilderness, extreme wilderness.

Visiting the light station and opening the heavy wooden door as you enter the tower, you are immediately greeted by worn grey circular stairs rising upwards within the tower. The darkness inside the tower is broken only by a small, single window on each landing.

Personally, I can envision the ghosts of the lightkeepers walking up those stairs every night carrying their cans of sperm whale oil or kerosene to light the lamp, and throughout the often long night, they kept constant vigil tending to the lamp and keeping the area safe for mariners. They were always there for mariners, standing out as a symbol of security. Some of the surviving Cove Island logbooks have numerous references to mariners, whose ships had been destroyed in storms or run on the rocks, seeking refuge at the light station.

In the tower itself, under the eaves, there are bronze down spouts, lion's head gargoyles, on each of the windows. They're a symbol of a less complicated age. It was a touch of class, a real work of art in the middle of the Canadian wilderness.

The original stone cottage that housed the lightkeeper and his family remains. The second lightkeeper, David McBeath, and his wife, Mary Jane, managed to produce a family of 10 children in that little light. So there are a lot of stories in that house.

West of the tower sits the fog alarm building, and it is one of the only completely intact diaphone fog systems. When you enter the building it looks like you can just turn those Lister diesel engines and away it will go. It's immaculate.

We are encouraged by the pending passage--I hope--of Bill S-215, as we believe this will do much to preserve these historic monuments and to ensure that Canadians have the opportunity to experience and learn first-hand.

As volunteers, we are smitten--I guess that is the word--with these lighthouses. We're almost obsessed, to a point, in our efforts to preserve and protect them for Canadians of all generations. When you see young children having their first experience visiting the light, their sense of wonder and awe--their eyes just light up--it's priceless. This past summer we had a family group that came out to visit the light. They rented a boat in Tobermory and made the effort to come out to visit the light. This visiting family was from St. Petersburg, Russia. They had heard about the light and they wanted to see it and experience it first-hand.

I believe that the preservation of lighthouses, Bill S-215, is a shared responsibility, shared between the government and our groups, the non-profits. There's a wonderful opportunity here to do some really good work in preserving our lighthouses.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that Bill S-215 allows future generations to be able to visit and experience first-hand our unique and priceless marine heritage. We must be able to preserve the legacy and the lore of these lights for future generations.

Thank you.